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Abstract

My impression is that Erna Brodber brings into play an unusual mythmaking talent in her two novels at a time when myth is denigrated or undervalued in favour of a realism divorced from the intuitive imagination. Perhaps it would be wise to attempt to sketch in a kind of backcloth to the novels which may help, in some degree, to say what are my approaches to 'myth' before I come to the novels themselves.

The Life of Myth and its Possible Bearing on Erna Brodber's Fictions *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and *Myal*

My impression is that Erna Brodber brings into play an unusual myth-making talent in her two novels at a time when myth is denigrated or undervalued in favour of a realism divorced from the intuitive imagination. Perhaps it would be wise to attempt to sketch in a kind of backcloth to the novels which may help, in some degree, to say what are my approaches to 'myth' before I come to the novels themselves.

It seems to me that the tragedy of the divorce at which I have hinted above is concealed at this time by sophistications, by various theories, that invest in the surfaces of existence as an absolute projection of invariant design that allows cultures to frame themselves up within virtually separate humanities in attunement to their prepossessions.

As a consequence the depth possibilities of communities to touch and re-create subtle links and bridges between multi-faceted nature and psyche are largely eclipsed by an enlightenment so-called that concerns itself with fields of experience geared to uniform (rather than cross-cultural) parentage of tradition. Such a retreat into patterns of closure or identity within (say) areas of the Third World in the twentieth century reveals at times astonishing and unsuspected parallels in other so-called advanced contemporary societies.

The price of a loaf of bread in the Soviet Union has not changed since 1922. One merely has to reflect on the state subsidies across close on seventy years, that are stretched and torn to breaking point in the maintenance of an identical economic code imprinted on a loaf of bread, to perceive that the surfaces of society are no projection of invariant ideology but on the contrary a mask concealing cataclysmic divisions and stress. It is doubtful however whether this conclusion has been reached by the majority of the Communist Party assembled at this moment in Congress as I write this Note.

It is not my intention to discuss the travail of the Russian economy except to indicate a naked instance of the concept of unchanging order that may inhibit cultures - whatever their apparent achievements - from arriving at re-creative and changed ways of reading reality to transform frames of difference and deepen a medium of vital diversity-in-universality.

Within the prosperous West, with its dazzling commodities and fluctuations of price, its dispersal of subsidy and inflation, the operation of invariant codes needs to be discerned in much more complex ways. One instance may be perceived perhaps in hidden biases within societies that surface to preserve invisible walls between races and cultures.

One may trace circumscriptions of imagination within institutional practices in the fall of the pre-Columbian civilizations of America within the Spanish Conquest of the sixteenth century. But it was not always so. Both parties - Sixteenth-century super-power Spain and the royal sun-cultures of pre-Columbian America - possessed ancient potential for mutual insight and re-visionary change within their forms and rituals. Spain possessed arts of memory that were still precariously active in Renaissance Europe when the conquistadores set sail: arts of memory signifying innermost objectivity, innermost variation and evolution in a medium of contrasting motifs of creativity. The pre-Columbian age possessed the legacies of Quetzalcoatl - however distant or seemingly lost - signifying the evolutionary wedding of earth and sky and linkages of outer space and inner space. But true change across the generations was bitter and slow in the wake of Conquest within what is now known as Latin America.

Let us glance at the fate of arts of memory in Renaissance Europe. They were still active in alchemy, in architecture and painting and literature, but a side of enlightenment was to split them into separate fields. Frances Yates, the distinguished scholar, has written with pregnant force of the enlightened thinkers who began the initiation of divisions within such arts, whether into fields of chemistry or weaponry that we now take for granted as separate areas of logic. Some such separation was inevitable one would think in liberating processes of experiment from obsolescent hierarchies and frames. But the enlightenment bred a paradox. It began to turn its back on the life of the intuitive imagination. It negated the necessity to visualize in new ways, to re-vision in new ways, to recall and re-interpret in far-reaching ways, subtle links and bridges between the arts and the sciences, between poem and painting, between music and figurations of memory associated with architecture.

One needs to leap into the heart of the twentieth century to appreciate the tragic consequences.

In her first novel *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) Erna Brodber advances Anancy's 'kumbla' as sustaining capacities one may liken to the craft of freedom but also subsisting upon a borderline to mirror technologies of a prisonhouse and of frozen sensibilities. The 'kumbla' means many things that differ with different people, but it becomes, in the eye of Anancy trickster, a dangerous bridge in the malaise of tradition between craft and vocation and an imperilled world. Anancy succeeds in outwitting his antagonist and saving his children within the theatre of the 'kumbla', but the paradox or sinister borderline remains and one shall see soon how Erna Broder deals with this. 'But the trouble with the kumbla is the getting out of the kumbla. It is a protective device. If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate... Vision extra-sensitive to the sun and blurred without spectacles' (p. 130).

Robert Oppenheimer was possessed of parallel misgivings, I would suggest, in his vocation as a scientist in witnessing the Bomb he had helped to build, which others saw as a shield over the free world. His misgivings left him bereft before the image of Death he felt he had unwittingly sponsored, pure mathematics in separation from numinous art or creative conscience within the cement of an explosive, blinding shield or 'shatterer of worlds'.

Thus – it seems to me – a perverse cross-culturalism, a bridge from fearful vocation into shattered space, is born of divorced arts and sciences. It is unsurprising therefore that, as the twentieth century has continued to unfold, technologies that once seemed supreme in their mathematical logic or purity as engines of material progress are now agents of dread pollution. Science fiction makes game of mechanical monsters, but its illumination of the perverse as an end in itself is not a medium of therapeutic penetration of the ailments of cultures and communities.

When Anna Rutherford introduced me to Erna Brodber's novels I was struck immediately on reading them by the penetrated body of the text, by the numinous fractures in the surfaces of the narrative. Such penetration and fracture helped to give a sharper edge to borderlines such as we noted in Anancy's 'kumbla'. May I return now to the 'paradox of sinister borderline' in the 'kumbla' that we contemplated a short while ago. The ambiguity of the 'kumbla' is its protective armour that impoverishes vision. Blindness to manipulative techniques becomes natural. The light of perception becomes unnatural. One sees therefore how difficult it is to dislodge boundaries except by a deepening of the intuitive imagination, of inner space, by which to contemplate a psychological recovery from blindness. A blindness to the mystery of love makes love unnatural. The conversion of blindness therefore into a

medium of unsuspected healing light is not easily achieved but there is a wonderful evocation of the possibility in an encounter Nellie, the I-narrator in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* has with her neighbours Miss Sada and Mass Stanley.

I could know as soon as I crept through the undergrowth of coffee trees that separated my father's land from his house how things were going with Mass Stanley. If he was in one of those quiet far away dreams, between Miss Sada and he, they would take away all the sunshine and the excitement and leave me in a cold, white cloudy November day without even the sound of rain drops. If she was in the kitchen, if she was washing outside, if she was in the hall, it didn't matter. Miss Sada would collect all the sunshine and the life from everywhere into herself and she would beam it at him. I would stand outside and see the light like the sun boring through two shrivelled shingles. It would come like the enlightening focus of a flashlight in the dark, beaming straight and constant from Miss Sada, whether it be her back or her knee or her hand, coming from whichever part of her was in direct line with Mass Stanley's head. I knew I couldn't cross it. (p. 105)

The boundary remains. She 'knew she shouldn't cross it'. But private space is deepened. The nature of blindness, the manipulative techniques that rob a community of access to original perception, is converted into a beam or psychical link between generations.

*Myal*² (1988) best embodies perhaps an intuitive leap or conversion of boundaries in Miss Gatha who rallies her West Indian community to overcome a threat of diseased intercourse between Mass Levi and the beautiful fifteen year old Anita. Levi immerses himself in spells to steal Anita's vital spirit. The threat runs therefore far deeper than a desire for sexual possession. It is another version of a sinister borderline, a circumscription of soul on which Levi is intent.

Miss Gatha's march upon Levi is akin to a rallying of forces from crevices of being beneath and above the surfaces of existence. Levi is, in a sense, a doomed tyrant, a doomed 'spirit thief'. Yet his doom was not inevitable. He may have succeeded in his plan. He was not directly known to Miss Gatha who brought him down – it seems to me if I read the novel aright – within an activation of 'subconscious/unconscious' layers of imagination or arts of memory. Such arts are not an embodiment of formula. If anything they breach formula within unpredictable re-visionary cycles of the imagination in which specificities of landscape, vessels, recesses, rooms, spaces etc. are converted into a theatre of soul as boundaries move, shift, re-settle, turn into a loom of sign-posts that need to be read in new lights.

Agatha Paisley's witchcraft recalls the deceptions by which Shakespeare's Macbeth judged himself immune to nemesis until the immovable forest moved. The very forest becomes the witches' prophetic cloak

converted now into a 'private hurricane' within another age, another century.

I shall quote a passage from *Myal* that is relevant to what I have just said but first let me underline certain issues of the witches' camouflage. The conversion of the witches' prophetic march in the guise of a moving forest – as it affects a West Indian witch or trickster, in this instance – is to be associated, I think, with the intuitive force of a train of imageries coming earlier in the novel. That train invokes a rhythmic borderline between dance and trance-like possession, between possibilities for pregnant truth and the drain of abortive adventure, between investments and disinvestments in camouflage. In the context of camouflage the figure of Ole African is to be reckoned with. It is Ole African's masquerade that inspires a jigsaw intervention on the occasion when pebbles rain on Anita's house. The pebbles cease. The poltergeist menace subsides. But Levi has not yet been defeated. The preservation of a shelter for Anita is no more than a suspension of lurking terror that the community has to wrestle with through and in itself. An invisible body creeps into Anita's bed and waits its chance. Thus Gatha's access to layers of ancient withchcraft, in the subconscious/unconscious, is a revelation of unsuspected theatre in the body of an apparently marginal community in the West Indies. Her 'private hurricane' or moving wood is threaded backwards into the rhythms of the narrative to gain momentum, so to speak, in foiling the dread tyrant: a momentum born of the past yet of an unpredictable arousal of resources in a voyage of psyche on land and on sea as one senses when 'legs and thighs are oars' in the passage I shall now quote.

Silent Miss Gatha started to talk. Anyone who had seen Miss Agatha Paisley in the spirit before would think is a coconut tree in a private hurricane that was coming down to the road. Or somebody else might say is Birnamwood come to Dunsinane. Miss Gatha looking like she had a warning. The long green dress with the tiny red flowers, the head-tie of the same print tied rabbit-ear fashion, the big wooden circles in her ears and the bunch of oleander gripped tight in her hands like they were one and the same. And the swinging and the swaying and the twirling! Miss Gatha now have no ordinary foot walking thump-thump and mashing the stones down into the mud. Toes only and the legs and the thighs are oars. (p. 70)

The force of Brodber's fiction lies, I have suggested, in its intuitive bearing on apparently incorrigible boundaries that sustain the hidden tyrannies or biases or loss of integrity of soul in an ailing world. Ella, of *Myal*, of whom I have not spoken before, is an important character in portraying the ravages of such communal or global ailment. Those ravages, I find, are all the more telling in that Ella is a kind of innocent

victim whose 'clarity' – as the novel draws to a close – is attained after much suffering. From childhood she is the victim of taunts, of implicit abuse, because of her half-white status. She is adopted by Maydene Brassington and her Jamaican husband, a minister of religion. Maydene is an Englishwoman, her husband William, like Ella, is of mixed blood. Ella marries an American called Selwyn who is unable to help her and who appears to bring her latent disease, her incapacities, to a climax. Those incapacities border upon a nucleus of transfigurative and far-flung resources in herself. But that nucleus remains so blocked away that she is divided in herself, she remains strangely ignorant of a text of being that is eclipsed within her. Such eclipse – if I may so put it – makes her Selwyn's victim. In place of her inner text he writes a play that is built on a series of manipulations and perverse exploitations of folk-memories that he takes from her.

Ella has no recourse but to return to Jamaica from the United States. She has become a kind of zombi, but the seed or nucleus of transfigurative dimensionality remains: 'Long conversations between her selves took place in her head. Mostly accusations' (p. 84).

Is she – in her estranged body – a curious talking mirror reflecting the ailments and potential therapies of her sick society? She 'looks into Anita's eyes and talks to her ... asks questions of Teacher and Miss Amy. It so happened that with a fuller view of Grove Town and its people, came also a fuller view of her immediate surroundings... She felt cold... She was beginning to feel dry. Over-drained' (p. 81).

Ella – as half-talking, half-silent mirror bordering upon territories of 'zombification' that exists everywhere in a tormented humanity – is relevant perhaps to what I have previously described in this article as 'perverse cross-culturalism'.

In such perversity, it is not only 'rogues in Whitehall' who need to 'change their tune', but – in Reverend Simpson's words – the roots of 'zombification' are to be traced in 'a phenomenon common in parts of Africa and in places like Haiti and Brazil, they tell me... People are separated from parts of themselves that make them think and they are left as flesh only. Flesh that takes directions from someone... There are persons trained to do the separation... Spirit-thieves' (p. 108).

Simpson's parable – with its global interconnections in new worlds and old – brings back in a different way the issue of 'enlightenment', of which I spoke earlier in this article.

Is it not possible to see Ella as the victim of an 'enlightenment' that has long concentrated in the humanities on patterns of behaviourism as a logical field in itself?

Does not behaviourism discard the eruptive unconscious, the life of the psyche as subversive and also as potentially creative?

'Flesh that takes directions from someone' may well have some area of its residence in a psychology of behaviourism – investing in surfaces of existence – that opens the way, however unwittingly, to losses of inner reality and manipulation by hollow media (p. 110).

Within the long march of the twentieth century there are distinctions of behaviour, I have no doubt, between liberals and revolutionaries, saints and sinners, to be measured by political and clinical investigators, but then *possession*, the curiously real/unreal depths of the possessed mind divorced from, yet obscurely triggered by, layers of reality may come into focus in some degree. And 'flesh that takes direction from someone (may) bring to mind the empty temple into which seven devils worse than baalzebub could enter' (p. 108).

I am aware that Ella becomes the catalyst of a revolutionary cell or movement which involves Reverend Simpson and affects the Brassingtons and others. But I would venture upon a certain caution. The ebb and flow of passion, the 'draining', in Ella's flesh and estranged body, is sometimes invoked – it seems to me – in a much too flattened prose-narrative. The consequence is involuntary parody. The endemic deprivations of the community may unwittingly parody a constitution of innocence. If *Myal* were a linear fiction this would not matter. Indeed within the progressions of realism, with which we are familiar, it would be appropriate. But Brodber's narrative style penetrates surfaces and raises unsuspected edges of light and dark. There is no doubt that she is a writer of unusual talent.

NOTES

1. Erna Brodber, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (London: New Beacon, 1980). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Erna Brodber, *Myal* (London: New Beacon, 1988). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.